Guidance on Questions

1. Write as few questions as possible to obtain the information you need. The shorter your survey, the greater the likelihood of response.

2. Make sure questions are consistent with the scope of your survey. The Evaluation Planning Worksheet asked you to define the scope of your survey (question #8). Now that you are developing your survey, you need to make sure that the respondent will know what you mean by "watershed," or "region," or "community" in which you are seeking answers. The best way to make sure all respondents are "on the same page" is to include a map of the watershed, region or community you are focused on, or to indicate "within X miles of your home/office."

Likewise, make sure all your questions are relevant to the scale in which you are working. For example, asking people in an agricultural watershed whether they are concerned about job opportunities in their "region" is potentially confusing. Stay focused on the area you define and keep questions relevant to that area.

2. Make sure questions are consistent with your intended audience. Questions for suburban homeowners are going to be very different than questions for local government officials. Keep focused on the audience identified in your Evaluation Planning Worksheet.

3. Make sure every question is as clear and simple as possible. One of the recommended steps in the survey development process is to ask one or more "representative responders" to review the survey and make sure the questions are clear, simple and concise. Unclear questions and biased questions should be removed or replaced before giving the survey to the larger audience.

4. Avoid open-ended questions (fill-in-the-blank) except for brief, informal questionnaires to small groups (less than 50), and for questions that generally have one answer. In general, when given blanks to fill in, answers can range across the board, making analysis of the answers difficult. Fill-ins **can** be used if the sample pool is small and creative problem solving is a goal (i.e. perhaps for focus groups), and for answers that have one possible answer (such as gender).

5. Make sure you don't have embedded questions. An embedded question is a question within a question. For example:

Is land use planning with public input an important issue in your watershed?

This question asks: 1) is land use planning important? 2) is public input important? And 3) is land use planning with public input important?

Another example:

Check all of the following ways you seek useful information about your watershed:
- ☐ *TV*
- ☐ *Radio*
- ☐ *Library*
- ☐ *Soil conservation district office…*

This question asks you to not only identify where you've gone for information, but whether it was useful. If the information you sought **wasn't** useful, how do you respond?

A better question:

How often have you seen, heard or read about information pertaining to local land use in the following:

	Never	Occasionally	Very Often
TV	☐	☐	☐
Radio	☐	☐	☐
Library	☐	☐	☐
Soil conservation district office	☐	☐	☐

6. Avoid leading questions that may skew results:

Consider the following:

Describe your relationship to the environment:

My quality of life depends on the health of the environment	Strongly disagree	Mildly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Mildly agree	Strongly agree	Don't Know
Conserving and restoring native plant communities is an important goal of land management	Strongly disagree	Mildly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Mildly agree	Strongly agree	Don't Know
We should maintain or enhance the diversity of wildlife populations	Strongly disagree	Mildly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Mildly agree	Strongly agree	Don't Know

Each of the questions will likely all result in positive responses. Instead, consider:

If given $100 to split amongst the following, fill in the dollar amount you would distribute to each:
___ *preserving wetlands*
___ *preserving farmland and open spaces*
___ *educating school children about environmental issues*

___ *installing riparian buffer strips along our lakes and streams*

Consider using the above format for determining how much people value the environment.

7. Consider whether you need to narrow the timeframe of your questions. For example, if at the end of a two-year information/education campaign that included a dozen opportunities you want to know what activities the local residents have participated in, you may want to phrase your question:

> *In the past 2 years, to what extent have you….? (or how often did you….?)*

8. Minimize the amount of personal data requested. The more personal questions, the less likely you'll get a good response rate.

9. Put personal, confidential and sensitive questions at the end of the survey and explain why the information is needed and how it will be used. Putting personal, confidential and sensitive questions at the end of the survey increases survey response rates. Explaining why the data is needed and how it will be used also increases response rates.

10. Write out any acronyms.

<u>Guidance on Responses:</u>

1. Make sure the choice of responses are as unbiased and neutral as possible. Choices such as:

☐ *not a problem*
☐ *slight problem*
☐ *moderate problem*
☐ *serious problem*
☐ *don't know*

each include the word "problem". Respondents may therefore think that there's maybe more of a problem than they originally thought. This may skew the results.

2. Limit response choices to only those that are necessary. For example, providing 4 response choices on a scale is better than 5-8 responses. Example:

- Instead of: 1) Never 2) Rarely 3) Occasionally 4) Fairly often 5) Often 6) Very often 7) Almost always 8) Always

  Consider: 1) Never   2) Seldom   3) Occasionally   4) Frequently

- Instead of: 1) Agree 2) Tend to Agree 3) Tend to disagree 4) disagree

  Consider: 1) Agree   2) Disagree

- For seeking input on income, instead of listing a series of income ranges, state what the watershed/county medium income is and have them indicate whether their income is greater than or less than the medium income.

3. Combine "seldom" and "never" if there is no reason to distinguish between them. For example, if the question is: "How often do you attend local planning commission meetings?" there is probably little reason to distinguish between seldom and never. For that question consider using:
> 1) seldom or never 2) occasionally 3) frequently

4. Avoid the use of "other" as a response unless necessary. The "other" answer is often overused in surveys and serves as an "out" for respondents. One logical use of "other" is a question about race that might list as potential responses:

> 1) black   2) white   3) other

5. Order the progression of responses from left to right, flip-flopping positive to negative sentences occasionally to prevent a patterned response:
> 1) Never   2) Seldom   3) Occasionally   4) Frequency

Later, 1) Frequently   2) Occasionally   3) Seldom   4) Never

6. If the natural tendency is to answer a series of questions at the same end of the scale, include both positive and negative "questions."
> *Example: The Steering Committee leader:*

Listened to suggestions from its members	1) Agree	2) Disagree
Incorporated ideas from its members	1) Agree	2) Disagree
Embarrassed people who had off-beat ideas	1) Agree	2) Disagree
Worked well with its members to develop the plan	1) Agree	2) Disagree
Often gave unclear directions	1) Agree	2) Disagree

7. For sensitive questions, consider including "prefer not to answer" as an option. Use of that answer might be appropriate for seeking input on a facilitator used as part of a focus group, and how receptive the facilitator was to new ideas.

8. For judgmental questions, consider including "no basis for judgment." If asked with the right series of questions, such answers should reveal that the respondent really doesn't know or isn't qualified to render an opinion.

Other tips:
- For mail-out surveys, follow all steps in the "Process For Mail-Out Survey" flow chart and include a stamped or pre-paid return envelope to increase response rate.